

Psalm 44

Has God Fallen Asleep?

(See also *Korah Psalms*)

Form

Psalm 44 is a corporate (national) lament which commences with a hymn celebrating Yahweh's lordship, especially over enemies as displayed throughout history (vv1-8).

This psalm may also be thought of as a covenant psalm. For verse 17 is of immense importance to this psalm. We will see strong allusions in this psalm to Exodus 15, Deuteronomy 32 and Deuteronomic language which centres on the notion that though God's people have remained true to the covenant, yet they are experiencing covenant curses reserved for covenant breakers.

As the superscription indicates, this psalm evidently belongs to a collection of psalms used in worship by the Levitical family of Korah.

The psalm is also described as a *maskil*, a word that connotes wisdom or skill. However, Psalm 44 is a psalm expressive of confusion and perplexity. Consequently, this term does not seem to mark out this psalm as a wisdom or didactic psalm but rather points to the skill with which the psalm was sung or the skill involved in its presentation.

Occasion

This psalm evidently follows a major military defeat at the hands of a foreign power. This would be comprehensible if this constituted God's judgment upon a sinful, idolatrous people. However, the protest of this psalm is that God's people are loyal to the covenant (vv17-22). Hence the perplexity as to why God should reject his people. Indeed, it seems as though the very commitment of Israel to Yahweh has incited their enemy to slaughter God's people (v22).

Similarities in language between this psalm and Jeremiah (e.g. cf. v11, 22 with Jer 11:19; 12:3; 25:34; 51:40) do not warrant the conclusion of many scholars that the psalm belongs to the same period as Jeremiah, but rather indicates the influence of this psalm on Jeremiah. The military defeats prior to the fall of Jerusalem and exile are ruled out since these were plainly due to Israel's perfidy in contrast to the faithful Israel of Psalm 44. The same goes for military defeats prior to the fall of the Northern Kingdom (2 Ki 17:7-8), especially as this psalm is most likely written from a Southern Kingdom perspective. This considerably narrows down the list of possible military defeats, for throughout much of Israel's history God's people were covenant-breakers. Most of the military defeats recorded in the books of Kings and Chronicles are readily explained as fitting judgments of God.

Note that in verse 9 it is said "you no longer go out with our armies", which presupposes that God's people still has armed forces, even though they have suffered defeat. If the singular use of the third person pronoun in verses 4, 6, 15-16 are the words of the king then a pre-exilic date is demanded.

We cannot be sure as to the precise historical setting, but the devastation wrought by the Assyrians during Hezekiah's reign would be a strong contender. Before surrounding and threatening Jerusalem Sennacherib's army had attacked and captured all of the fortified cities of Judah (2 Ki 18:13) and we might reasonably conjecture that, consistent with Assyrian practice, many of the inhabitants of these towns were deported and relocated, justifying the complaint of verse 11: "You...have scattered us among the nations". This happened despite the reforms Hezekiah had effected (2 Ki 18:1-6). Hezekiah speaks of this time as being "a day of distress and rebuke and disgrace" (2 Ki 19:3a).

However, another possible setting is during the reign of Jehoshaphat. The superscription of Psalm 44 parallels that of Psalm 42 and we have already noted the linguistic links between Psalms 42-43 (a unit) and Psalm 44. We saw that the sons of Korah, who were certainly active during Jehoshaphat's reign (2 Chron 20:19) may well have composed Psalms 42-43 on behalf of one of their own who had been forcibly captured by a foreign power and, therefore, cut off from the temple. Jehoshaphat had led God's people away from idolatry into covenant fidelity. It is conceivable that Psalm 44 is written with the events of 2 Chronicles 20 in mind, when a massive coalition of forces marched against Jehoshaphat. It would seem that the people of Judah retreated before them (cf. Ps 44:10) as they gathered in Jerusalem to seek Yahweh's help. In his great prayer Jehoshaphat says, "See how they are repaying us by coming to drive us out of the possession you gave us as an inheritance" (2 Chron 20:11). In such a context it is readily explicable why Psalm 44 should emphasise how Yahweh had driven out the nations and planted "our fathers" in the land.

Structure

See *Korah Psalms* for linguistic links with Psalms 42-43. The following language continues themes already introduced in the previous two psalms: 'command/decrees' (v4; cf. 42:8), 'victories' (v4 [*yeshûw'âh*]; cf. 42:5, 11; 43:5), 'rejected' (vv9, 23; cf. 43:2), derision (vv13-16; cf. 42:3, 10), 'oppressed' (v24; cf. 42:9; 43:2), the downcast soul (v25; cf. 42:5; 43:5), 'unfailing love' (v26; cf. 42:8) and vow of praise (v8; cf. 42:5; 43:5).

In psalms of corporate lament it is common to find the following elements, often in roughly this order: address and introductory petition, lament proper, confession of trust, petition and vow of praise. This psalm orders these elements in a distinctive fashion. There is no opening petition. Rather the psalm starts with a hymn (verses 1-8), which involves a confession of trust (vv-7) and a vow of praise (v8). This is followed by a long lament (vv9-22). The psalm concludes with petition (vv23-26).

The transition from opening hymn to lament is very marked and is effected with the common literary device - "but" (v9). In psalms of lament it is often the case that this "but" marks a movement from complaint to a statement of trust or confidence. In this psalm the movement is reversed. Thus the present desperate plight of God's people is stressed in this psalm. In this psalm God's people struggle with the clear evidence of God's rejection of them and cry out to Yahweh to not let this state of affairs persist. God's rejection is a common cause for complaint in psalms of lament, though often it concerns God's rejection of the individual psalmist. Here, however, rejection of the nation forms the complaint.

- Remembrance of God as the source of glorious victory: his conquest of the Land (vv1-3)
- Confession: God the source of continuing glorious victory (vv4-8)
- Lament: God the source of present humiliating defeat (vv9-16)
- Protest: The present humiliating defeat has occurred despite our continuing covenant loyalty (vv17-22)
- Cry: God called upon to rescue his bewildered, humiliated people (vv23-26)

Two Voices?

For most of the psalm the collective “we” or “us” is used. However, at certain points third person singular pronouns are used:

- You are my King and my God (v4)
- I do not trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory (v6)
- My disgrace is before me all day long, and my face is covered with shame at the taunts of those who reproach and revile me, because of the enemy, who is bent on revenge (v16)

Some scholars suppose that at these points the king of Israel is speaking. However, many others view the variation as simply stylistic. That is, Israel as a collective unit declares “You are my King”, etc.

Hymn: Victory and its Source

Verses 1-8 are bound together not merely by their positive hymnic and confessional character. They are especially pervaded by the concept of victory.

The following structure is observable:

- What God has done in the past (“in days long ago”) [v1]
- God enables his people to have victory over their enemies [v2]
- Victory is not achieved by own weaponry and might but by God alone [v3]
- God gives victory to his people as covenantal King and God [v4]
- Victory is not achieved by own weaponry and might but by God alone [vv5-6]
- God enables his people to have victory over their enemies [v7]
- Confidence in God for the present (“all day long”) and the future (“forever”) [v8]

There are two things that stand out from this understanding of the structure:

1. Any confidence in God’s ability to bring victory for his people – a greatly shaken confidence in this psalm – is rooted in the understanding of God as “my King and my God”, whether this refers to the covenant (and personal bond) between God and his people or between God and the Davidic ruler (see below).
2. The outer frame of this chiasm suggests a direct relationship between the thought of verse 1 and verse 8. In the face of present disaster (v9ff) it is the remembrance of God’s covenantal faithfulness to his people in the past, expressed in victories he has enabled them to achieve, that enables God’s people in the present to boast in God as the one who gives victory to his people and to praise him as the one who will continue to do so in the future.

In the first instance the transmitted tradition of the Conquest is recalled (vv1-3). The image of driving out the nations and planting the “fathers” (v2) may be that of clearing a forest in order to plant crops¹, or, as Calvin opined, of uprooting undesired

trees and replacing them. But the important thing is the recollection of what God did in those days, a time which now seems "long ago" (v1b), so disconnected from the present as to raise doubts as to their relevance to the crisis now facing God's people.

There is more to this opening statement than first meets the eye. It is in fact a telling allusion to Deuteronomy 32:7:

Remember the days of old;
consider the generations long past.
Ask your father and he will tell you,
your elders, and they will explain to you.

In context these words, written before the Conquest, insinuate that Israel has forgotten the days of old, forgotten what God has done for them. This is evidenced by their idolatry which moves God to reject them (Deut 32:15ff). Indeed, God reminds them of the covenant curse he had uttered to scatter them (v26). Yet God is reluctant to effect this curse because he knows it will lead to the taunting of Israel's enemy (v27). But the humiliating retreat of God's people before their enemies expresses that fact that "their Rock had sold them", that "the Lord had given them up" (v30).

Consequently, Psalm 44 involves ironic allusions to the Song of Moses, hence the key statement: "*All this has happened to us, though we had not forgotten you or been false to your covenant*" (v17). God is treating his people as though they have forgotten him, as though they were absorbed in their idolatry, as though it is right to bring covenant curses upon covenant-breakers. But, the psalm protests, the opposite pertains. God's people have listened to what their fathers have told them. They remember God and what he has done and are true to him, utterly eschewing idols. Nevertheless, God has caused them to retreat before their enemies (44:10). He has scattered them (v11) and has allowed their enemies to utter their taunts (vv13-16). He has sold them as though they were worthless slaves, not even bothering to seek a higher price at the slave auction (v12).²

But first the psalm wants to stress that it is the opposite of the Israel depicted in Deuteronomy 32:7. Consequently, the psalm begins by highlighting the way in which God's people remember what they have been told of their God, especially of the past victories he had won on behalf of his people.

With respect to the Conquest, it was God who won the great victory. Just as the image of God planting the fathers in the land recalls that Exodus 15:17 so the image of God as a Warrior who effected victory through the use of his "right hand" and his "arm" (v3b) also assumes this first Song of Moses (Ex 15:6, 12, 16). The confession of Psalm 44:4 - "You are my King and my God" is rooted in Exodus 15:2 - "He is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him", for in Exodus 15 the one who is "my God" is very much the Great King (Ex 15:18). It also follows from this allusion that the confession "You are my King and my God" implies "my father's God is my God" (cf. Ps 44:1).

God did not need the sword or arm of the Israelites to win the land for his people (Ps 44:3, 6). It was with his "hand" that the nations were driven out (v2a). It was he who crushed the occupying peoples, that is, pushing or slaying enemies "with the horn" (v2b). The image here is perhaps that of a bull throwing down another creature with its horns and trampling it underfoot.³

Victories are guaranteed for God's people since he is their King and God (v4). They push back (v5a // "drove out", v2a) their enemies and trample their enemies (v5b // "crushed the peoples", v2b). But they do this "through" God and his name (v5), because ultimately it is he who effects victory. Consequently, Israel (or possibly the king) can declare, "I do not trust in my bow, my sword does not give me victory" (v6 // v5a). It is God who enables his people to experience victory in battle and who puts their enemies to shame (v7). Consequently, just as "our fathers" boast of the victories wrought by God in times past (v7), so the Israel of today boasts of this same God (v8).

Lament

However, the lament of this psalm, to which we now turn in verse 9, is due to the fact that this boast seems a hollow one which appears to contradict real life. For this very God is now enabling his enemies to be victorious over his own people. This same God is scattering his own people among the nations (v11b; contrast vv2a, 5a). This God is crushing his own people (v19a; contrast v2b) and is putting them, not their enemies to shame (vv13-16; contrast v7b). Indeed, the covenant curse of Deuteronomy 28:37 is now being experienced by God's people (Ps 44:13) even though they have remained faithful to the covenant. The psalm speaks of God's people being made "a byword among the nations" and Hengstenberg reasons this implies that just as liars might be called Cretans and wretched slaves, Sardians, so miserable people are called Jews.⁴

Sheep for the Slaughter

The image of God's people being like vulnerable sheep occurs twice in the psalm:

- "You gave us to be devoured like sheep and have scattered us among the nations" (v11).
- "Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered" (v22).

In Romans 8:36 Paul cites verse 22 in a most suitable manner. For Psalm 44 concludes with an appeal to Yahweh's unfailing love. Underlying the lament of the psalm is the conviction that notwithstanding the seemingly inexplicable abandonment of God's people into the hands of their enemies, God is still bound to his people in covenantal love. Similarly, Paul insists that nothing can separate the Lord's people from the Lord's love.

Yet Psalm 44 stresses the fact that God's people have become prey for their enemies. So verse 19 (NIV): "But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals and covered us over with deep darkness". The word translated as "jackals" is actually *tannim*, which, aside from possibly referring to a jackal, may also denote a great fish, a sea monster, a serpent, a dragon, a crocodile, a fox or a wolf. Compare the AV rendering: "Though thou hast sore broken us in the place of *dragons*, and covered us with the shadow of death."⁵ Calvin took the word to refer to whales and understood "covered us over with deep darkness" to imply being swallowed by a whale. Certainly, the parallelism between the two cola of verse 19 suggests that the image is that of a chaos monster of some kind, thus associated with "deep darkness".

The Sleeping God

Psalm 78:65 states, "Then the Lord awoke as from sleep, as a man wakes from the stupor of wine." Likewise, in this psalm, Yahweh is portrayed as being asleep. The psalmist calls upon him to wake up and stop sleeping, to get up from his bed and come to the aid of his people.

There have been attempts to understand Psalm 44:23 and 78:65 as presupposing the same kind of deity as is found elsewhere in the ancient world where the motif of a sleeping divinity is encountered.⁶ For example, in *Atrahasis I* we learn that Enlil cannot sleep because of the noise being made by the human race.⁷ In *Enuma Elish* primordial gods cannot sleep because of the noise being made by the younger gods. In *Atrahasis II*, Enlil's sleep is interrupted because the lesser gods are about to attack his house. In *Enki and Ninmah* Enki's mother, Namma, wakes him to do something about the rebellious refusal of lesser gods to do work.

On another occasion Elijah scorns Baal as being a god who sleeps and needs to be awakened before he will hear the cries of his priests for him to act (1 Kings 18:27). Some have thought that this text presupposes a cultic awakening of a deity in morning rituals. But there is no indication in Psalm 44 of any cultic ceremony being involved in the call to God to awake. With respect to Yahweh Psalm 121:4 insists that "he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep", indeed does not need sleep like Enlil.

Kraus takes Psalm 44:23-24 to mean that God has so hidden his face from his people that it seems as though he has fallen asleep, that is, that he has forgotten his people. Dahood thinks the psalmist may also have in mind Yahweh's inattention to his prayer.

In his study of sleeping deities in the ancient world Bernard Batto⁸ came to the conclusion that the image of the sleeping deity is one which expresses God's omnipotence. God can sleep because he has supreme authority. Batto uses this to explain the significance of Jesus sleeping in the boat during the storm (Matt 8:23-27; Mk 4:35-41; Lk 8:23-27). But the psalmist is certainly not drawing the conclusion that Yahweh's figurative sleep is evidence of his sovereignty. On the contrary, the psalm insinuates that the exercise of Yahweh's sovereign power on behalf of his people is conspicuous for its absence. The psalm protests that it appears God is like an unconscious sleeper, unaware of the desperate plight of his people.

Answers?

Is there any attempt in this psalm to explain why God allows his people to suffer, despite their covenant fidelity? In verse 22 God's people declare that they face death "for your sake". This has been interpreted in two main ways:

1. *As an expression of covenant loyalty.* The import is: "It is precisely because we have been faithful that we are now suffering as we do." This construction may involve either of two connotations:
 - a. *As an explanation:* covenant loyalty explains suffering.
 - b. *As a venting of frustration:* we suffer despite remaining faithful.
2. *As acknowledging that God is somehow glorified by the suffering of his people.* The import is: "We suffer as we do in order that your great underlying purpose might be achieved."

It is difficult to sustain 1(a) since, as we have already noted, for national Israel suffering is typically the consequence of covenant infidelity. Interpretation 1(b) certainly accords well with the context. However, Paul's use of verse 22 at Romans 8:36 strongly suggests that he understood "for your sake" to mean "that God may secure his people in his love". In Psalm 44 it is doubtful that this precise purpose was understood, though, significantly, the psalm does end by stressing Yahweh's "unfailing love". Still, it is quite likely that verse 22 does involve the acknowledgment that the suffering of God's people does serve some great underlying divine purpose, consistent with his secure covenantal love.

¹ Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) 52.

² One of my students, Jason Forbes, emphasizing the Sinai covenantal roots to this Psalm, observes how verse 12 involves an apparent valuation of Israel which is the opposite of God's estimation of them as his "treasured possession" (Ex 19:4).

³ So Spurgeon, following Adam Clarke, thinks of a bull tossing attacking dogs into the air and trampling them underfoot.

⁴ Noted by Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*.

⁵ Similarly, Young's Literal Translation. Interestingly, the New King James prefers "jackals".

⁶ A. Mrozek & S. Votto, "The Motif of the Sleeping Divinity" in *Biblica* 80 (1999) 415-419.

⁷ See the summary by H. Jacobson, "Elijah's Sleeping Baal" in *Biblica* 79 (1998) 413.

⁸ B.F. Batto, "The Sleeping God: An Ancient Near Eastern Motif of Divine Sovereignty" in *Biblica* 68 (1987) 153-177.